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CICERO'S RELIGIOUS BELIEFS¹

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This brief paper is intended to be a note to a note in Professor Tyrrell's *Correspondence of Cicero*. The formal biographers of Cicero seem to have been impressed with a very high sense of the religious tone of much of his writing, and with a feeling that he exemplified these high ideals in his life. It is needless to say that this latter view is not shared by Drumann, Mommsen, and their followers, but the men who have studied his career most closely with a view to expounding it sympathetically in their books seem to be unanimous on the point. Thus Forsyth, in his *Life of Cicero*, says:

And although on speculative questions, such as the nature of the gods, the Supreme Good, and similar subjects, he was more the expounder of the opinions of others than the asserter of his own, he was a firm believer in the great cardinal doctrines of a Providence and a Future State. And he was also firm and decided in his views of moral obligation. In his lofty and unhesitating choice of Right in preference to Expediency as the rule of conduct he is a safer guide than Paley; and his work *De officiis* is the best practical treatise on the Whole Duty of Man which pagan antiquity affords.²

And more emphatically Anthony Trollope, in his *Life of Cicero*, says:

Cicero was no doubt a pagan, and in accordance with the rules prevailing in such matters it would be necessary to describe him of that religion, if religion be brought under discussion. But he has not written as pagans wrote, nor did he act as they act. The educated, intelligent Roman world had come to reject their gods and to create for themselves a belief—in nothing. It was easier for a thoughtful man, and pleasanter for a thoughtless, to believe in nothing than in Jupiter and Juno, in Venus and in Mars. But when there came a man of intellect so excellent as to find, when rejecting the gods of his own country, that there existed for him the necessity for the real God, and to

¹ Read by title at the thirteenth annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South.

² P. 325.

recognize as a fact that the intercourse of man with man demanded it, we must not, in recording the facts of his life, pass over his religion as though it were simple chance. . . . Cicero did not come at all as a teacher. He never recognized the possibility of teaching men a religion, or perhaps the necessity. But he did see the way to so much truth as to perceive that there was a heaven; that the way to it must be found by good deeds here on earth; and that the good deeds required of him would be kindness to others.¹

And in the same sense Friedländer, *Sittengeschichte Roms*, says:

And yet, though Cicero recognized doubt as justified, his own conviction was as firm as it could be without a belief in revelation, and we may presume that his grounds for a belief in immortality were those of the majority of believers, for the very reason that they rest, not so much on dogmas or results reached by philosophical reasoning, as on the instincts, the needs, the feelings, that are partly common to human nature and partly had grown from the peculiar influence of Roman development [if I may so translate that much abused word *Kultur*].²

And, in a recent work on Cicero, Mr. Hannis Taylor, according to his reviewer, finds that Cicero's significance for the world is not in his greatness as an orator, as a statesman, as a patriot, or as a scholar, but in his discovery of monotheism and in so popularizing this belief that he paved the way for Christianity. This novel view will hardly be accepted widely, but it serves at least to show the esteem in which thoughtful minds hold the views of the great Roman.

It would be a work of supererogation, in this presence, to quote, even briefly, from the thousands of passages in Cicero's writings which treat directly of religious or moral questions. They occur so often and in so many places that it is impossible not to take them as the expression of Cicero's own views. But Professor Tyrrell, the editor of his correspondence, and a most sympathetic critic, makes the following statement: "Again we have a view very characteristic of the modern Frenchman in the lightness with which he assigns to Terentia religion as her department, while his own business is with men."³ This remark he expands in a footnote, as follows:

We find often in Cicero casual hints at his agnosticism, for instance in Att. v. 10. 1: "For now what harm, pray, has death brought to him? Unless

¹P. 330.

²III, 745.

³I, p. 40.

perhaps we are led by silly tales to think that he is suffering the torments of the impious in the lower world. . . . If these things are false, as now all men understand, what pray has death taken from him except the sense of pain?" In the speech for Rabirius, Cicero anticipates an eternal existence for the souls of the good, basing it on the instinctive belief of mankind; again in the *De haruspicum responsis* he affirms his belief in the existence of gods, grounding it on the evidence of design in nature; again in the *De natura deorum* and in the *De re publica* he speaks of an overruling Providence. But it is strange how lightly his beliefs sit upon him and how little they influence his conduct. In the *Tusculan Discussions*, I, 74, he says that the god who holds authority in our breasts forbids us to leave our post without his leave; yet we know that during his exile he clearly and deliberately contemplates the commission of this act, and we hear nothing at all about any prohibition of conscience or even a hint that self-destruction is unworthy of a good man.

There is perhaps no man in history of whose inmost thoughts we know as much as we do of those of Cicero. His friends committed the most appalling indiscretion in publishing his most intimate correspondence to the world, seemingly without thought or care of the impression it would make on those who read it. For this reason those who read it candidly are surprised, not that it shows many evidences of weakness, but that there is so little in it unworthy of the great man—and this in spite of the fact that he speaks to his friend Atticus in the most intimate way, and says things to him that few of us would be willing to say to anyone. There is absolutely no concealment, and we can trace the very mood in which he writes. It is, therefore, in these intimate letters that we must look for those "hints" of which Professor Tyrrell speaks, and not in his public speeches, or in the formal treatises, or even in the letters which were addressed to all sorts of correspondents. For he tells us expressly, in a passage which fortunately did not impress his editors: "For I write in one way what I think only those to whom I am writing will read, and in another way what I think many will read."¹ We may therefore take for granted at once that the passage which Professor Tyrrell quotes to show his agnosticism did not seem, in Cicero's own opinion, to be contrary to the beliefs expressed by him elsewhere; otherwise he would not have expressed it in a speech in court. He says at another place, in a letter of sympathy to a friend: "What I have

¹ *Fam.* xv. 21.

very often read and heard, that there is no ill in death, for if sensation is left in it that is rather to be called immortality than death, but if it is lost that ought to seem no misery which is not felt."¹ In short, a disbelief in the traditional hell does not necessarily imply a disbelief in some sort of a heaven. His statement in the *De re publica* that "there is in the sky a definite place where the blessed enjoy everlasting life" is nowhere contradicted in any of the letters; at the utmost he states it as a possibility, quite in keeping with his system of philosophy, which accepts nothing positively and rejects nothing positively, holding that a reasonable degree of probability is all that the human intellect can attain—and this is not what is ordinarily considered agnosticism in religion. A thorough search of the correspondence fails to invalidate the statement of Friedländer that, "though Cicero recognized doubt as justified, his own conviction was as firm as it could be without a belief in revelation."

But Professor Tyrrell finds a disposition to "assign to Terentia religion as her department, while his own business is with men." This statement is based on one passage in the letters: "If these ills are fixed, I wish to see you as soon as possible, light of my life, and to die in your embrace, since neither the gods, whom you have most earnestly worshiped, nor men, whom I have always served, have returned gratitude to us."² I do not see any "lightness" in this despairing exclamation, and it was written at the one time of Cicero's life when it is universally recognized that he was least himself. His unjust banishment, embittered as it was by the feeling that he had been betrayed by those whom he had unselfishly served, seems to have thrown him into such a state of despair that he loses actually that clear style for which he is famous and comes as close to writing bad Latin as it is possible for Cicero to do. As against this idea, and at the same time as illustrating his feeling, I would set a passage from a letter to his brother written during the same time: "But may you not experience this. I would pray the gods that you might not, had they not ceased to hear my prayers."³ Surely here is neither "lightness" nor agnosticism in the ordinary sense of the word. In this same period occurs that

¹ *Fam.* v. 16.² *Fam.* xiv. 4.³ *Q.F.* I. 3.

inconsistency to which Professor Tyrrell refers again. It is not to be doubted that he contemplated suicide at this time. This is shown in several passages, notably one to his brother: "However, I shall live as long as you need me and as long as you see that some danger must be faced; I cannot stay longer in this life. . . . It ought not to be and cannot be that I should linger in this wretched and disgraceful life longer than your needs or a well-grounded hope demands."¹ It is, however, difficult to decide whether this is a counsel of despair merely, or whether he felt himself justified by the words he added to that passage which was referred to above: ". . . Cato, however, so departed from life that he rejoiced that he had found a reason for dying. For that god who reigns in us forbids us to depart hence without his bidding, but when god himself gives us just cause, as then to Socrates, now to Cato, often to many, then, by my faith, the wise man will depart joyfully from this darkness into that light. And still he will not break those bonds of his prison, for the laws forbid it, but he will depart summoned and freed by god, as by a magistrate or some legitimate power."² Quite irrespective of the fact that the episode occurred some fifteen years before the passage quoted was written, the right of suicide was allowed freely by the Stoics and was very often exercised by them. And, knowing Cicero as we do and sympathizing with him, as most of us must who are honest, in his hesitancy when it came to a decisive action, we must believe that he was at most contemplating such a step, which (and Professor Tyrrell seems to have overlooked this detail) he never carried into effect.

The charge of agnosticism is much harder to meet. Very few men speak of these subjects in their private correspondence, and I have been really surprised at the number of passages which I have found which seem to give a clue to his real beliefs on the subject. It is necessary for us to keep in mind the remark of Trollope already quoted, that his intellect was "so excellent as to find, when rejecting the gods of his own country, that there existed for him the necessity of the real God, and to recognize as a fact that the intercourse of man with man demanded it." When, therefore, he speaks, at many points of his writings and speeches, of the immortal

¹ *Q.F.* I, 3.

² *Tusc. Disp.* I. xxx. 74.

gods, it is often impossible to say whether he is speaking from conviction or merely using a common expression. Many of the passages I have collected contain merely the exclamation *dei immortales* or *dei boni*, and these are of course to be disregarded. The passage on which Professor Tyrrell bases his charge is in a letter to Atticus (iv. 10. 1) in which he says: "Chance will see to this, or if there is any god who cares for it." It is most astonishing that this should be made the basis for a charge of agnosticism; he has just said how he longed for a stroll and a chat with Atticus, and the whole sentence, which Professor Tyrrell does not quote, is, "But as to that stroll, chance will see to it, or if there is any god who cares for it." If, now, we remember that Atticus was an Epicurean, whose whole philosophy was based on a denial of the existence of the gods, and if we also think of the trivial subject under discussion, it seems to me very unfair to take this as a serious doubt of the existence of a higher power. In two other passages to the same Atticus, on more important matters, he says, "But some god will control this,"¹ and "But fortune will see to this, since we cannot use reason much."² In a letter to another Epicurean he uses language which seems to me to give the clue to the passage under discussion, the point of which lies in the use of the disjunctive conjunction. He says, at a time of great crisis, "Unless some god or [*vel*] some chance comes to our aid, we cannot be saved."³ This seems to me to make clear that his own idea is that it is "some god," but if his correspondent, with a different view on such subjects, prefers to say "some chance," he will make no objection. Much more emphatic, both because of the circumstances under which the expression was used and because it was said to this same atheistic Atticus, is the really surprising statement: "Unless the same god, who freed me better than I dared hope in the Parthian war, favors the state."⁴ Twice to this same Atticus and to his wife he makes practically the same reference to Providence: "If the gods help me, I hope to be in Italy about the ides of November"⁵; and "With the help of the gods you may expect me before frost."⁶ In the last period of his activity in public life, when he was the real, though unofficial, head

¹ *Att.* vi. 3.³ *Fam.* xvi. 12.⁵ *Att.* xvi. 3.² *Att.* vi. 4.⁴ *Att.* vii. 1.⁶ *Fam.* xiv. 5.

of the Roman state, exerting every effort to rally the only forces that could prevent the shipwreck of what he considered the best form of government that had ever existed and the only hope of human liberty, he writes to all sorts and conditions of men with increasing earnestness and solemnity, and we have frequent appeals in the name of the gods. Especially to Brutus does he appeal to stand firm for the right side: "Bend yourself, by the immortal gods, to that care and thought,"¹ he writes one; "Do not lose the opportunity, by the gods, for this service,"² to another; "If some god had not given that mind to Octavianus Caesar, we should have been lost."³ And to Brutus, over and over, he writes: "The temples of the immortal gods are threatened by the hopes of these needy and desperate men";⁴ "To the rescue, then, by the gods";⁵ "But hasten, by the gods";⁶ and, again, "In you and your colleague, under Providence, is all our hope."⁷

It is, as I have said, difficult to prove a negative, and especially to meet the charge that a man who has professed a firm belief in an overruling Providence in his formal writings has denied it, in effect, in his more esoteric utterances. But it would take very much more proof than I have been able to discover to convince me that Cicero was disingenuous in this matter.

In a note to a passage in the *Academica* Dr. Reid says very truly: "To a large portion of the educated classes of the time philosophy was as real a thing as religion is to the same classes now, and they lived by it just as much." Of Cicero's views on philosophy we must have the highest opinion; the charge is that they sat lightly on him and had little influence on his conduct. I have never seen a most significant letter quoted on this point, and I therefore quote it at some length. A young man, Mescinius Rufus, had been Cicero's quaestor in Cilicia. We are repeatedly reminded that the relationship between a governor and his quaestor was almost that of a father and a son. At the outbreak of the Civil War, when men were greatly divided in their views, this young

¹ *Fam.* x. 3.

² *Fam.* x. 5.

³ *Brut.* ii. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Brut.* i. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.* i. 15.

⁷ *Fam.* x. 22.

man wrote to Cicero for advice, and the reply seems to me to show an attitude which is worthy of all praise:

Though I never had any doubt that I was very dear to you, still I realize that more every day, and this is clear which you told me in a certain letter, that you would be more devoted to me than you had been in the province—though, in my judgment, nothing could be added to your devotion in the province—as your judgment is freer. And so your former letter gave me the greatest satisfaction, as I saw from it that you were most cordially awaiting my coming, and since affairs had turned out otherwise than you thought, that you were greatly pleased by my advice; and from this last letter I received great pleasure from your decision and from your loyalty—your decision, because I see that you, as all strong and good men ought to do, think that nothing is expedient except what is right and honorable, and your loyalty because you promise that you will stay by me whatever plan I form. Nothing can be more gratifying to me than this, nor, as I think, more honorable to you. . . . What is right is clear; what is expedient is doubtful, but still, if we are the men we ought to be, that is, worthy of our study and of our writings, we ought not to doubt that those things are most expedient which are most honorable.¹

It is perfectly clear that Cicero had no illusions as to the outcome of this struggle. He knew, as few others did, the weakness of the party of the so-called "Optimates" and the formidable power of Caesar. He detested the indecision, the petty jealousy, the weak boasting, the sordid greed, of the majority of the followers of Pompey, miscalled the Great, and had no exaggerated idea of the genius of that doughty warrior. And yet, because he thought that honor and duty pointed that way he trod it unhesitatingly. As Trollope says, "Cicero was no doubt a pagan," but we may be pardoned for expressing the wish that those who profess a better creed might feel as deeply and sincerely as he seems to have done that only those things are most expedient which are most honorable and might as consistently show the courage of their convictions.

¹ *Fam.* v. 19.